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PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

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TO: Local and Intermediate School District Superintendents and Public School Academy Directors

FROM: Carol L. Wolenberg, Deputy Superintendent

SUBJECT: School Safety Zone Guidance for Michigan Schools and the Protection of Michigan Students from Contact with Convicted Sex Offenders

The following resources and information are intended to support Michigan schools' safety plans related to the "1,000 foot school safety zone". On January 1, 2006, Michigan passed legislation to update the law intended to protect Michigan school children through a safety zone created to keep offenders away from school children. The state organization most able to respond to a school's request for legal information is the Michigan State Police Criminal Justice Information Center.

Changes in the law strengthen previous legislation by including recreational and athletic facilities. While not instructional sites, they now are locations within the safety zone. The law distinguishes between those offenders convicted before January 1, 2006, and those convicted after that date. Individuals released after January 1, 2006 must comply with the law related to their work address, their residence, and their contact with children.

School personnel may access the school safety zone law at www.michigan.gov/schoollaw. Select "student safety zones" under the category "school safety".

School personnel are encouraged to develop, monitor, and review safety plans. Consider the following activities to protect Michigan students:

1. Assure staff members are aware of and understand the school safety zone.
2. Identify a staff person to regularly check the sex offender registry for offenders residing in the school neighborhood. The registry web address is <http://www.mipsor.state.mi.us/>.

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3. Maintain positive relationships with local law enforcement, including the county prosecutor's office. If the district has a school liaison officer(s), coordinate with the officer(s) to effectively address the school safety zone requirements.
4. Highlight the significance of the reciprocal quality of staff relationships with law enforcement. Law enforcement may be able to assist in the risk assessment of a new or current sex offender residing in the community. Conversely, staff can alert law enforcement in the event that a sex offender has entered the school safety zone and/or the school community.

In terms of any sex offender living within district boundaries, risk of contact with school children will vary according to the circumstances of the offender's crime. Features that can assist schools, with which law enforcement are familiar and have knowledge, include the significance of:

the discrepancy between the offender and victim's age,
the type of crime with which the offender was originally charged,
the type of relationship between the offender and victim,
the existence/severity of violence associated with the crime, and/or
other involvement with law enforcement and the court system.

5. Update crisis management plans to assure the crisis team has developed materials related to parent notification, media relations, reports to law enforcement, and staff/student counseling and support.
6. Involve parents and children in an educational, prevention effort to reinforce personal safety. While the term 'stranger danger' was a popular concept in the past, current research recommends children receive personal safety instruction about inappropriate, disturbing, or dangerous behavior. Most victims are assaulted by someone with whom they are familiar.
7. Consider asking for law enforcement assistance regarding identified juvenile sex offenders within the district and school safety zones.
8. Employ a comprehensive plan which includes other non-legislative aspects of school safety: the broader child protection issues such as safe walking routes and bus stops in the community, parent communication, district volunteer and employment screening practices, and public relations.

The following questions not addressed in the law may be useful to consider in developing a comprehensive plan:

1. While the law includes off-site locations such as athletic facilities, do plans include other off-site programs such as school-sponsored early childhood settings?

2. While the law primarily addresses adult sex offenders, do plans protect students from juvenile sex offenders? Since schools already educate juvenile sex offenders, do plans assess the risk of serving these juveniles within the school environment?
3. If a convicted sex offender also is a parent, can this parent enter the school safety zone to attend parent/school events?
4. If the sex offender's place of work is outside of the zone but involves an offender's travel through a school safety zone, i.e., delivery or maintenance work, how should a school respond?

As previously noted, answers to these questions may be found through consultation with the local office of the prosecuting attorney, any district employed school liaison officer(s), and/or other school law or law enforcement contacts.

We hope that this guidance and resource information is helpful. The following resource material has been posted on Michigan Department of Education's Michigan Safe Schools website at www.michigan.gov/safeschools:

Best Practice Recommendations for School-Based Planning to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse

If you have questions or need additional information, please contact Leisa Gallagher, Safe Schools Consultant, by phone at (517) 241-2293 or via email at gallagherl@michigan.gov.



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Best Practices in School-Based Child Protection and School Safety Zones

March 2006

Safe Walking Routes

Ask staff to consider, *Safe Routes to School - A How-To Handbook for Making it Safe and Fun to Walk and Bike to School*. This initiative suggests participating schools to form a local team consisting of school administrators, teachers, parents, student leaders, law enforcement officers, and other community members who are interested in children's health and safety. These teams work together to assess attitudes and behaviors of parents and students, analyze the safety of the environment leading to the school and research related policies. The teams then formulate recommendations and create an action plan for making improvements. The manual can be found at <http://saferoutesmichigan.drum-server.com/>.

A Safe Place to Go

Your local law enforcement may have initiated a watch program. The Community Child Watch program enlists citizens to post a sign with an icon of an eye in their window. This 'watchful eye' offers a safe place for children to go (<http://www.michiganchildwatch.com/>). The Neighborhood Watch asks adults to look for suspicious activity in the neighborhood (<http://www.nnwi.org/>).

NOTE: Parents will still want to have a plan in the event that the "Child Watch Neighbor" isn't home at the time the child would like to visit.

Watching Over Bus Stops

As bus stops are outside of any school safety zone, a school might ask for adults to supervise bus stops as students' transition on and off the bus. This supervision might be particularly helpful in the event that a sex offender's residence is within the vicinity of a particular bus stop.

Choosing and Implementing Personal Safety Lessons

Review any personal safety lessons taught in the district and assess whether the lessons emphasize inappropriate, disturbing, and/or destructive behavior exhibited by someone with whom the child is familiar rather than lessons taking a "stranger danger" approach. Review lessons to assure that the prevention of sexual abuse is covered. In addition, look at the scope and sequence of instruction:

- Consider whether the prevention education occurs at every grade level.

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- Consider whether students are receiving developmentally-appropriate prevention education.
- In the event that a sex offender does reside within the neighborhood, consider changing the timetable for lesson instruction. For example, if the discovery of an offender occurs in the fall, move the instruction to occur earlier in the school year.

As an example, the *Michigan Model for Comprehensive School Health Education* provides lessons on the prevention of sexual abuse at the elementary, middle, and high school levels (<http://www.emc.cmich.edu/mm/default.htm>).

Parent Alerts

With the assistance of local law enforcement, districts may want to develop a risk assessment process to proactively determine when and under what circumstances the school informs parents about a sex offender in the area. Law enforcement can assist in the determination of the elements of a parent notification letter. These strategies can then become institutionalized into the district's school safety plan.

Staff Training

Adults often fail to recognize a child's quiet or indirect disclosure of inappropriate sexual contact because of the difficulty facing the reality of sexual abuse. A district may wish to provide staff training on:

- the prevalence, signs, and symptoms of child trauma,
- child expressions of a traumatic event,
- effective listening during a child's disclosure, and/or
- helpful responses to a disclosure.

This training may reduce the likelihood of school personnel's failure to identify and/or respond to child's report of sexual abuse.

Look for training materials which are written for schools and classroom teachers. Local child abuse prevention council staff can assist in this training. As an example, the book, *Right On Course*, published through Civitas (www.civitas.org), offers ways to identify trauma as well as guidance to respond to a child experiencing trauma.